

EXCERPTS FROM ES BEGAN AN DER WEICHSEL by Jürgen Thorwald

References to General Gehlen

page 10 - re launching of Russian Offensive 12 January 1945.

"The General Staff of the German Army built up no illusions for itself concerning the scale of this offensive. General Gehlen, head of the Eastern Army, ~~who consolidated~~, who consolidated the reports concerning the eastern foe, was both a skillful and a conscientious man in his work, whose estimates of the deployment of Soviet Troops and the Soviet plans for attack carried an incontestible weight. Underian had no reason to question the reliability of his colleague. The Soviet dispositions were all the more alarming inasmuch as now only the remnants of the areas conquered during 1941 and 1942 separated the Soviet armies from Germany itself. In East Prussia, Russian troops already were on German territory, and the fate of the German civilians who were overtaken by surprise in the late autumn of 1944 in Memmersdorf and Goldap, including murder, rape, looting and deportation, forced consideration of the imminent developments with anxiety....."

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"The reports which Gehlen presented since November in regard to the numerical strength of the Soviet forces and their artillery, armor and planes, had at first impressed Guderian as improbable. However, they were repeatedly demonstrated as being true and as early as December 1944, the numerical ratio had risen to 9:1 between the Russian and German divisions on the Vistula front; to 6:1 between the Russian and German armor; to 10:1 between the Russian and German artillery and in some sectors had even reached a ratio of 15:1. The ratio of air power between the two could not any longer be gauged in terms of numerical ratios....."

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"Guderian was startled out of his trend of thought as the door of the compartment opened. In the doorway stood General Gehlen. He had come in once more to discuss the general presentation of the situation to the Führer.

"Gehlen's sharply chiselled face was pale, with a yellowish undertone. He suffered from stomach ulcers, the occupation disorder common to numerous overworked General Staff officers.

"Herr Generaloberst", he said, "I have completed an additional special report concerning the respective ratio of military strength of the area surrounding the Baranov bridgehead, which takes into consideration the very latest substantiating data. According to this information the enemy is deployed on a 90 kilometer front with five infantry armies, six armored corps, two self-contained armored corps and five armored brigades. The ratio of infantry strength now amounts to 11:1 in favor of the enemy; in armor it is 7:1 and in artillery it is 20:1. The Russian artillery deployment at many points amounts to 250 artillery pieces per kilometer. The conclusions are so evident that they should convince even the Führer of the fact that we are facing a catastrophe at the Baranov bridgehead unless something is done. . . ."

"Guderian looked square into Gehlen's face. Even Gehlen still judged the situation on the basis of reasoning. He had no contacts with a world in which decisions are reached on the basis of instinct, inspiration and moods. Guderian stood up and began to pace back and forth.

"Gehlen", he said, "today is our last chance. If the armored

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divisions in the West are set on the march as late as tonight, they still could arrive in time to avert the worst....'

"In his mind's eye he still saw the Christmas Eve of 1944, in which he had resumed the battle for the armored units in the Ardennes. The Ardennes Offensive had begun December 16th. On the 22nd of December it was already clear that the offensive had been shattered.

"For this reason, on Christmas Eve, the 24th of December, Guderian had attempted to effect with Hitler the immediate transfer to the Eastern Front, a move promised in this event, of the assault divisions which were no longer required for a defensive action in the West.

"Hitler's attention, however, with the obstinacy of the frustrated, had remained fixed on the Ardennes. He insisted that the initiative remained in his hand both now as heretofore. He (Guderian) had misrepresented the magnitude of the danger from the East. The statistics concerning the Russian concentrations were simply invented. Allusions to the fate threatening the East German populace he had at first ignored, then refuted with a remark that the Prussians in the days of Frederick the Great had also been called on to make sacrifices, and that he also could demand that the Germans make sacrifices for his sake. The atmosphere of that Christmas Eve still were vivid in Guderian's memory - along with the willfully desired lack of familiarity with conditions in the East, not only on the part of Hitler, but also in the case of Jodl, who had never visited one of the fronts; their clinging to long obsolete concepts, and - as Guderian felt intuitively - in Jodl's case, with a lack of comprehension on the part of the South Germans for the fate of the East.

"During the same night, Guderian had returned to Zossen. En route he

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received the news that Budapest had been lost. Arriving in Zossen, he received a further communication to the effect that the Panzerkorps Gille, which had been stationed as an assault reserve force behind the Vistula front in accordance with a direct order from Ziegenberg, had been ordered transferred to Hungary for purposes of recapturing a foreign capital. This, however, was the crown point of the defeat (for Guderian), to have a part of the Reserves, which had been painfully retrieved from the Eastern Front, simply transferred, by order originating above Guderian, to another position....."

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"Then the contest had started. As on Christmas Eve, Hitler refused to acknowledge the threat from the East. He refused to recognize that his bitterly hated opponent, Stalin, had the power to order out such great forces. With the lack of restraint of someone who inwardly senses his error, he still expounded the illusion of the insufficiency of the Russian armies, which had been pursuing him since 1941. He had never relinquished the belief that Stalin's reservoir of manpower must someday run dry. Now he again was of the opinion that this had occurred. Again he spoke of the "randomly conscripted rabble" and of the "Plunderdivisions" which Stalin still could muster up. He screamed that General Gehlen, in company with his estimates, belonged in an insane asylum. He ignored Guderian's objections that Hitler, on that basis, could have him, Guderian, committed to the same asylum, since he concurred in Gehlen's opinion.....

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"Guderian stopped his pacing. 'We must achieve it today', he reiterated, 'This is the last chance left for us. Gehlen, don't let yourself be swayed by anything during our conference. Remain calm and collected, even if the Führer permits himself to be drawn into insulting the General Staff and you personally..!'"

"Gehlen understood. He spread out his cards and papers. While he was thus occupied, Guderian continued his pacing up and down. 'I repeat once more, the most important points of our presentation,' he said.

1. Immediate relinquishment of the Kurland Front.
2. Transfer of the armored forces from the West to the East before the night is over.
3. In event of refusal, a minimum of withdrawal of the over-extended sector of the 4th Army in East Prussia and saving of some divisions as reserves.
4. Operation "Schlittenfahrt" of Heeresgruppe A - withdrawal of our curved frontal position between the Vistula bridgeheads at Pulawy and Baranov and the Vistula, shortly before the Russian attack. Assault type defense before the Pulawy bridgehead. A fending off type of defense from the Baranov bridgehead to the Silesian border.

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"Guderian, with a face revealing the inner emotion which now gripped him, took his place at Hitler's left side, a practice that had been adopted since the bomb explosion of July 20th, which had destroyed Hitler's right eardrum. During this time, Hitler gazed across at Gehlen, who just stood upright with an uncommunicative expression on his face. Hitler sensed in Gehlen the personification of cold, unyielding reality, which he did not want to hear or recognize, or to which he did not want to surrender before it finally engulfed him and his pawns paid the price of his obstinacy in the East, South or West. His face took on an expression of rejection. Then he heard Guderian's voice....

"My Führer, "began Guderian, "I came back here again today to present the facts to you personally, since it has been established with certainty, according to all our information, that the Russian winter offensive, target Berlin, will open in three days on the 12th of January. I should like once again, as on the 24th and the 31st of December, to report to you in full candour, the details of the situation on the eastern front and for this purpose, have brought with me General Gehlen himself, who can present to you all corroborating details you may desire....."

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